

# KALINAGO RITUAL BATHS

By Prosper Paris

Plants have played a significant role in the livelihood of the Kalinago people. The use of herbs has been a practice since creation. The Almighty (The Great Spirit) said to mankind, *"behold I give you every herb bearing seed which is upon the face of the earth and every tree in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed"* (Genesis 1:29-30). *"To you it shall be for meat and everything wherein there is life, I have given every herb for meat and it was so."*

In the book of Revelations, John foresaw the earth made new, a world where people would experience healing from the leaves of the tree of life. *"In the midst of the street of it and either side of the river was there the tree of life which bear twelve manner of fruit and yielded her fruit every month and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations"* (Revelations 22:2). Hence, such biblical evidence demonstrates a direct relation between plants and humans from the beginning of time.

Plants have always been a reliable source of food and medicine but most importantly plants are used in the spirituality of mankind, particularly among indigenous groups of the world including the Kalinago people.

Our Kalinago ancestors handed down the spirituality of plants and herbs to us in the form of ritual baths, a practice still very evident in contemporary settlements.

A **Ritual Bath** is a ceremony done in private and administered by a trusted member of the family or elder of the community. For this exercise to be successful it has to be performed during certain phases of the moon. For example, the first and last quarter is better suited for the ritual due to the belief that the spiritual world is more active at that time. Those willing to participate in the ritual are therefore expected to be receptive of the good spirit or the *Ichiri* to enjoy the full benefit of the ritual.

The individual situation may determine the number of baths needed. The severity of the situation may require more than

one bath or in many instances, a repeat of the same bath for up to seven (7) days.

## WHY DO KALINAGOS TAKE BATHS?

There is common belief that ritual baths can be taken to expel negative forces that hinder good performance or prevents one from achieving success in areas of education, jobs, relationships or business.

Superstitious beliefs are also used to justify physical ailments such as persistent sores, or rashes that cannot be healed through medical treatment. The requests for a ritual baths in such instances are therefore inevitable as the ultimate cure.

The Kwéyol term *mawé* is used to describe a change in behaviour resulting in the lack of motivation, low self esteem and passive behaviour and low energy. The assumption that the body has been done wrong may lead to a request for a bath.

Purification and cleansing baths are performed to help enhance the mood to function properly at work or at study. For example in the old days, before returning to school after long holidays, children were given ritual baths using special herbs. Parents saw this as a necessity to cleanse their children of all ill forces before sending them back to school for the new term.

There are also ritual baths to expel any negative spirit or *pyay* coming your way. People who take those baths think that they are immune to any bad spells. The collection of plants and leaves for this has to be carefully selected and respect for life has to be observed while humans seek healing. The plant and trees which are used also have life so the Kalinago has to first consult the Great Spirit and also seek permission from mother earth for her intervention and healing.

## THE BATH

Ritual baths can be taken at home, by the sea or at special places at the river mouth where there is a male current.

The herbs would be crushed using a volcanic rock and then tapped on the person's head while they sit facing the east. The person administering the bath would stand behind them. During the process, the recipient would recite a short prayer.

At home, a fusion of leaves, plants and herbs is boiled in a large pot. Some of those herbs would be maho piman, lavannda, ditan gwan chimen, mennen vini, kodjorik, lèspwi lézom, man better man, tonbé lévé, and many others depending on the situation. The bath is taken at midday or when the sun is directly overhead. In the old days there were no clocks or watches to know the time, therefore the direction of the sun was used. Midday was considered zero hours and the person taking the bath was not supposed to see or look down on his shadow.

Ritual baths are not limited to the individual but also to his property or belongings. In launching of a new fishing boat, a ritual bath is given to the boat in the early hours of the morning. This initiation is administered by the captain of the boat together with trusted crew members. Baths are also given to domestic animals when it was believed that *Soukouyan* was interfering or some evil was preventing them from breeding.

Hunting dogs are also given baths to keep them alert and

to prevent bush spirit (chien zonbi) or *ladjablès* from leading them astray.

The taking of ritual baths is something personal and should not be announced or made public before or after. The proper disposal of the remains from the bath is as important as taking the bath itself. If not disposed properly and someone were to step on it, they could inherit the spell or negative spirit. So hence the reason why depending on the nature of baths, they were taken in wind breaks or places where people were less likely to venture.

Over the years however, with the infiltration of religious beliefs and the exposure to other forms of healing, this element of the Kalinago tradition seems to be dying rapidly. Elders are reluctant to pass on their valued knowledge to the younger generation. The youth also are engaged in other activities with little interest in learning those traditions.

Even more sadly is the lack of respect for elders who once served as our scientists, doctors, and healers. Their spirits are with us today as we cleanse and heal ourselves with the herbs that the Great Spirit has given us and the knowledge our forefathers have left with us.

